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Approved For Release 2003/12/02 : CIA-RDP75-00001R000100020079-9

POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

Dec 1970

The Missile Gap Controversy

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The disputes surrounding the formation of military policy are not famous for their clarity, yet, even so, the controversy over the missile gap stands out as a muddled issue. The controversy arose in the late 1950s as a result of intelligence estimates that between 1960 and 1964 the Soviet Union might have more intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) operational than would the United States. Assuming the existence of a missile gap, opponents of the Eisenhower administration argued the existence of a deterrence gap, that Soviet supremacy in ICBMs was so great that the American strategic forces could be eliminated in a single massive attack. Administration spokesmen generally conceded the missile gap but denied a deterrence gap on the grounds that the American strategic forces were too numerous and varied to be eliminated by a single attack and that the leaders of the Soviet Union were aware of this fact.

We now know that the administration's contention that a missile gap did not necessarily imply a deterrence gap was never tested, since the missile gap itself never developed. Therefore it

*I acknowledge with gratitude the assistance of Bruce M. Russett, Morton H. Halperin, and especially H. Bradford Westerfield.

is almost impossible to evaluate the question of the deterrence gap, and we shall not endeavor to do so here--although, as the administration quite rightly pointed out, this rather than the missile gap was the relevant issue.

The missile gap was the result of a deliberate decision by the Eisenhower administration. The United States had many more strategic bombers than did the Soviet Union.¹ However, the Russians had recognized before the United States did the importance of the ballistic missile as a delivery system for hydrogen weapons,² and they appeared to be ahead in developing this new weapon which might neutralize the American advantage in manned aircraft. It was obvious that the United States, to meet the challenge, would have to develop a ballistic missile; the question was what kind and how many.